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ABSTRACT

A model for testing listening comprehension in English as a Second Language is discussed and compared with the Test for English Majors (TEM). The model in question incorporates listening for: (1) understanding factual information; (2) comprehension and interpretation; (3) detailed and selective information; (4) global ideas; (5) on-line tasks (i.e., immediate or concurrent); and (6) retrospective tasks. Each of these elements is explained. It is argued that this approach draws on schema theory: how the listener traces the speaker's flow of thought and tries to establish significance through related facts by means of top-down or bottom-up skills. It is also claimed that the speaker is thus actively engaged in information-seeking through phonological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic representations, to obtain a clear picture of what has been conveyed. In contrast to this model, it is suggested that the listening segment of the TEM presents some testing problems, particularly the "fill-in-the-gap" portion that does not conform to the principle of short-term memory and transforms the listening task into something like a cloze test. Contains 15 references. (MSE)

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AN EVALUATION OF A TESTING MODEL FOR LISTENING
COMPREHENSION

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ABSTRACT.

This paper is intended to investigate a testing model for listening comprehension which includes the following elements: 1) listening for understanding factual information, 2) listening for comprehension and interpretation, 3) listening for detailed and selective information, 4) listening for global ideas, 5) listening for on-line tasks and 6) listening for retrospective tasks. The study shows that this model has much to do with schema theory, i.e. how subject traces the speaker's flow of thought and tries to establish significance through related facts by means of what is called bottom up or top down skills. It has also been proved that the subject is not a passive recipient in the course of listening but rather he is actively involved in seeking information through phonological, syntactic or semantic and pragmatical representations so as to obtain a clear picture of what has been conveyed.

In contrast to the above mentioned model, the design of TEM 8'94 - listening part is subject to some improvements as far as the test patterns are concerned esp. the last part called "gap filling" which has some problems in that it fails to conform to the principle of our short term memory and more or less transforms listening task into something like cloz test for reading comprehension.

Key words: testing model, listening comprehension, top down, bottom up, schema,
Test for English Majors, grade 8

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I. INTRODUCTION

Listening is not merely a receptive activity, but rather a cognitive process entailing active thinking like identifying, analyzing as well as categorizing. Learner's strategies play an important role in listening comprehension. And a variety of listening skills can be measured through a given test.

There exist different theoretical models for listening comprehension. By summarizing what has been proposed by Richards (1983), Rost (1990) and Ur (1984), we have the following model:

1. Listening for understanding factual information
2. Listening for comprehension and interpretation
3. Listening for detailed and selective information
4. Listening for global idea
5. Listening for on-line tasks
6. Listening for retrospective tasks (Jiang Zukang, 1994)

The above mentioned elements almost include each aspect of listening skills which make up an evaluation of subject's overall listening comprehension ability.

This paper is intended to investigate the model for listening comprehension and find out its relationship with the subject's psychological process and what is meant by a good listener or a poor one. In the meantime, comments on TEM 8'94 (short form for Test for English Majors, grade 8) - listening part are to be made in comparison with the model and suggestions for improvement of the test design to be put forward.

II. SPEECH UNDERSTANDING -- A MENTAL PROCESS

Listening as well as reading are considered by linguists as receptive in contrast to speaking and writing which are said to be productive. This does not necessarily mean that the hearer's task is exclusively to listen passively without any involvement of his mind. In real situation, however, it proves to be just the opposite. What a hearer needs to do is to keep mentally active in order to understand. As we know once a cluster of utterances are perceived by the listener through the sense of hearing, he is expected to decode the information by reorganizing the 'sound words' in a manner of his own thinking pattern so as to store it in the short-term memory. By applying one's linguistic and extra-linguistic

knowledge the listener concentrates on extracting the message rather than lingering on isolated sounds by filtering irrelevant utterances. In this way he not only goes into deeper structure of the speech but also establishes meaning and therefore understands what the speaker is talking about. If he wants to store it in the long-term memory the listener needs to restructure the message and make further condensement. That is how listening comprehension works.

There is no doubt that listening comprehension also involves the subject's background knowledge, situational context and personal experience.

III. DIFFERENT SKILLS FOR LISTENING COMPREHENSION AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH PSYCHOLINGUISTICS

Modern linguists as Richards, Rost and Ur furnish us with various models for listening. By combining them together, we get the one mentioned at the beginning of the paper. Now let's go into detail by analyzing the skills separately and examine how they are associated with learner's strategies.

1) Listening for factual information

As a matter of fact to extract factual information is one of the main tasks for listening comprehension. This can be illustrated by news reporting or weather forecasts. As mentioned earlier the subject is not a passive recipient but rather he is actively seeking to construct meaning through a series of events and find logical coherence among the facts so as to understand what is happening. Here what counts most is to set up relations among sentences. That is to say the subject needs to utilize context, inference and background knowledge in the course of comprehension.

The two methods proposed by schema theory are applicable in task listening. They are bottom up and top down skills. The former indicates that the subject perceives data from low through intermediate to high level. In other words, from syntactic and semantic representations to pragmatic representations. This method is data driven because the hierarchical levels of language representations are activated through comprehension apparatus.

On the other hand top down skill is to establish relationship between the subject's acquired knowledge and the text exposed to him. That is to say to match the

retrieved knowledge to the heard one. If the two can correspond to each other, or we can say if the text perceived can fit into subject's linguistic frame, it is easy for him to gain access to comprehension. Otherwise he will fail to do so. Thus top down skill is concept driven and it is mainly determined by subject's encyclopedic knowledge.

In real situation, however, both strategies are frequently applied in the same time. And it seems that the subject processes information at all levels rather than from low to high.

In testing ability to acquire factual information the five "W"s i.e. "what, who, when, where and why" should be considered as the most important. The test can take the format of multiple choice or "True" or "False" questions.

2) Listening for comprehension and interpretation

We all experience such occasions when a speaker does not offer adequate information or rather fails to make himself clear. In this case it is necessary for the listener to understand and interpret the message conveyed. Also, there exists difference between fact and opinion. Facts are things which really happened while opinion is what people interpret the facts. So another task for listening is to understand speaker's intention and be able to tell opinion from fact. This is what we call listening for comprehension and interpretation. For this part of the test, the purpose is to test the subject's ability to identify facts from opinion. What we expect testees to know is the intention of the speaker and his interpretation of facts.

Again context plays an important role here. By this I mean the subject should be able to follow speaker's idea, trace his flow of thought, piece information together and consequently infer what the speaker is getting at. So uses of inference can be considered a strategy of listening for this part.

Apart from multiple choices, questions like "What does the paragraph proceeded or following this passage most likely deal with" or "By saying that, what's the speaker's intention" would be suitable.

3) Listening for detailed and selective information

This item of the test is aimed at checking the ability to memorize as well as

comprehend. It requires the subject's selective attention.

As we all know our memory capacity is limited. It can hardly store every single word or sentence perceived. But what it happens is that it takes the message out of the surface structure and transfer it into a more abstract form for storage. The condensed form of message is the essential information rather than isolated words, which makes it easier for the subject to retrieve.

There are two strategies to cope with this kind of test. One is to refer to the testing items before start listening, which can help the subject to spot what specific item is required of him to answer. Another way is to take notes in which the subject's job is to take down key words only for the purpose of recalling later.

For this part of testing, tasks should be something like 'spot listening', 'gap filling' etc. But these should be carried out immediately after being heard considering our short-term memory can only last about 20 - 60 seconds.

4) Listening for global ideas

This is considered as an easier part of listening comprehension for it can be only done after listening to a whole selection. It is believed by many that the longer a passage is perceived the easier it is understood for the fact that the subject is provided with longer time to contemplate or organize his ideas. It is often the case that the subject, at the beginning of the listening process, might miss a few utterances or words, but as he goes along he will pick up messages conveyed through the passage and in the end it is most likely he will catch the global idea.

What the listener should do this time is to identify the main points first and then group the supporting details together in order to find out the overall view of the passage. Therefore, tasks for this part would better be questions like 'what is the global idea of the passage' or 'give a summary of the passage heard'.

5) Listening for on-line tasks

Having discussed the four elements involved in listening comprehension the following two items treat methods for carrying out the test. Listening for on-line tasks is to measure the testee's ability to do two tasks at the same time, i.e. to do exercises while listening. Such measurement are applicable for the testing elements

one and two mentioned above. It requires the listener to fulfill multi-tasks by resorting to brain as well as hands. While receiving information from the speaker, the hearer is expected to spot the facts or the opinion from the flow of words. However there is a problem here. If the sequence of the items tested are designed matching the one of the speaker's, the subject may find it easier to do. But once their orders can not correspond to each other it requires more effort to the listener to get what is asked of him. In this case not only does he need to focus on specific facts or opinion, but also needs to have an overall comprehension of what the text is about.

A good listener is able to distribute his attention appropriately, i.e. he can carry out multi-tasks simultaneously. There's no doubt that linguistic knowledge such as lexical, syntactic and semantic one plays an important role. The subject's extra-linguistic knowledge i.e. cultural background, situational context as well as encyclopedia knowledge also constitutes an important part.

6) Listening for retrospective tasks

This method is designed to test subject's memory. The subject is required to finish tasks after listening to a selection. Tasks can be carried out through items like gap filling questions for global idea.

As we know memory can be divided into two kinds: short-term and long-term memory. With listening for retrospective tasks what we need is short-term memory which can keep message in storage for 20 - 60 seconds which is considered enough for fulfilling the tasks.

There are two strategies for doing those tasks. One is to identify the thesis statement and then to analyze and classify supporting details into groups so as to get a clear picture of what has been dealt with. The other strategy is to take notes. Note-taking serves as a supplement to our memory. The clues taken down can help subject recall from memory what has been heard. Thus key words that carry essential information are the ones to be written down. For example, in the sentence "American Revolution lasted six long and tremendously difficult years" (Yates, 1979), " American Revolution" and "6 years" are the key words for from these clues one can recall the complete sentence or the whole message. This second strategy is appropriate for gap filling item.

IV. COMPARISON OF THE ABOVE MENTIONED MODEL WITH TEM 8'94 --LISTENING PART

TEM 8 is a short form for Test for English Majors, grade 8. It is considered a proficiency test set out to examine how well the syllabus for English majors has been carried out. In March each year senior students will take the exam and the result will be studied by people who give the test. They will decide how to revise the test.

There are four sections in listening part. Section A, B, C are separately talk, conversation and news broadcast. There are 5 questions under each section, which are mainly concerned with items for factual information, detailed and selected information.

Comparatively fewer questions are devised for global idea and interpretation. There is only one for each. These are all on-line tasks. For Section D, however, students are expected to do gap filling after hearing the tape. Yet they are not allowed to see the actual items tested first. Instead they are provided with a piece of blank paper for the use of note-taking. It is all very well if as soon as they finish listening to the recording they start filling the gaps. The problem being that they are not allowed to do the exercises until they finish doing something else, reading comprehension, for example. This kind of the directions are not in line with the principle of our short-term memory, which can only last 60 seconds at most. As we know, notes are the clues which can help subject recall from his memory what's been heard. The message can only be retained in one's memory for a very short period since the text has been heard only once and there is not time for rehearsal or recitation. If the subject is not required to do the gap filling immediately after hearing it, his attention is diverted to something else and the traces of the message heard before will not be retained in his memory. Needless to say the result will be that the subject could hardly recall the exact words required of him to fill in the gaps instead he will make a wild guess which will be incompatible to the original text. And in this case it is not other than cloz test in reading comprehension. What's more, we do not know the criteria for grading this part yet. If the equivalents of the original words are graded incorrect there will be more problems remained.

Students taking the exam complained that they had no impression on exact words heard since some of the notes did not indicate the specific details of the text. If they are required to carry out the task immediately after hearing it, things will be much

different.

The following table shows the data taken from the exam result of TEM 8'94 for the seniors of English Major, Foreign Languages Department, Tsinghua University.

Scores	Number of students
90--100	3
80--89	6
70--79	5
60--69	4
	(Total of students) 18

From the table above we can see only 3 of the 18 students i.e. 1/6 get the excellent mark while 9 students got 'pass' and 'fair'. It shows that apart from linguistic proficiency, mental element plays an important role. The implications of the above analysis are to arouse the attention of the test designers to take into account our mental structure so as to offer more validity to the testing.

V. CONCLUSION

Listening comprehension is analogous to information processing. It has a lot to do with psycholinguistics. When the listener decodes the message he not only needs linguistic knowledge but also ability to use mental power. He should be able to identify the main points from supporting details and classify ideas into different groups. In this way significance of the sound words could be established.

Different listening tasks require different skills. We have bottom up and top down techniques. Both skills can be applied in the process of listening. Selective attention can be used in selective or spot listening. Listening for global idea or for interpretation requires the subject's general knowledge as well as the understanding of the thinking pattern of the speaker.

Listening for on-line tasks and for retrospective tasks are to check the subject's ability to fulfill multi-tasks at the same time and his memorization capacity.

The design of TEM - listening part needs some improvements in that the evaluator should show considerations to human beings capacity for memory and make

appropriate changes for the way of doing the tasks.

To sum up, there are a lot to be done to understand the function of our brain in listening to a foreign language.

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